

# 1. Rum and Roses

The golden bell in the tower of the old, wooden town hall struck six o' clock. It had been a quiet and peaceful day in Farnfoss. The sun was setting as the merchants closed up shop in the crowded market square. Apples, pears and boysenberries were packed up to be put on display once again on the morrow. A familiar aroma of fresh vegetables, raw fish and foreign spices lined the noses of the townspeople. A vendor threw a piece of meat on the ground, instigating warfare between dogs and some brave cats. Birds, mostly pigeons and magpies, crowded around the wares in the hopes of obtaining a meal or shiny trinket. Poorly dressed beggars and folk who craved a hot climate let out murmurs and complaints about the wind that came from the East, all the way from the Formfast mountains. The breeze had begun to carry a chilly air, announcing the end of summer. Most of the people on the square scurried away from the cold to their homes or, if a man preferred to avoid the responsibilities of his family, fled to one of the drinking establishments on Narrow street; the Thirsty Bear, No Man's Corner or, if one was looking for the kind of pleasure that was not served in a cup, the Rusty Hook. In any case, the square would soon be free of people and goods.

However, there was one boy who wanted to have one last look at the wares; a boy that had no coin on him, wore beggars' clothes and had been hiding in the shadows until the sun had sunk low enough to create shadows everywhere. The boy could hear his own stomach grumbling and, as if that had been the starting signal of his plan, leapt forward from the alley he had been hiding in, onto the square. No one had become aware of his presence. Most of the merchants were occupied packing up and even if they had looked for him, would need a sharp eye to see him. The boy was one with the incoming darkness, sliding in between people, gliding from cart to shop and fetching food, coin or other valuables from almost every single one of them. One could tell the boy was drenched in experience regarding sleight of hand and stealth... if one would have been able to notice the boy in the first place.

After being nearly over-encumbered by the stolen goods in his duffel bag, the boy disappeared along with the departing crowd, blending in like a drop of water in the sea. A mischievous, complacent smile played on his face as he evaporated; the food was no more nutrition than it was a trophy. He could not help feeling happy with himself for outfoxing everyone. Subtly, he broke out of the crowd and headed for another alleyway. *All I must do now is get back to Arrow. How delighted he will be with the meat, the boy thought, but I will keep the chicken to myself, I deserve it. Besides, he does not –* Shortly after entering the small alleyway, the boy's thought process was interrupted by a surprise, an unpleasant one. A raspy voice that he recognized all too well addressed him sharply.

"You stole one thing too many today, Red," the man said.

The man stood a couple of feet in front of the boy he called Red, blocking Red's getaway route through the alley with his large build. In his right hand was a rusty iron shortsword, which he swung back and forth slowly as he was talking.

"I saw you at Mendel's shop, grabbing the man's hard-earned money with your filthy thief hands. How would you like me to get rid of those? This town could do without your misdeeds and I reckon I will make them disappear along with your quick, stealing fingers, eh?"

Red gave no answer, he presumed Borus was not looking for one. He knew the Legion guard well. The moments they had shared together had been most charming, especially that time when Borus had promised to cut off his tongue and feed it to the pigs of guard captain Morris. *Ah, Borus, Red thought, Always ready for another round of cat and mouse. You did a good job finding me. Now if only you would believe me if I told you where Mendel gets his wares from, let alone his money.* Red knew that talking to the simpleminded guard was as useless as trying to teach a sheep how to bark. Instead he glanced around, his eyes scanning the area for an alternative way out. To his right was nothing but the stone wall of a house and a promising open window, though he deemed it too high to reach. If he ran back to the square, he might as well turn himself in – one guard near the square meant there would be more, and in all likelihood they were heading towards the alleyway right now, after hearing Borus' loud voice. Perhaps in the past Red would have attempted to run by Borus, but he had seen the guard's ability and precision with a sword; he reckoned himself too young and handsome to be cut in half. *No, Red thought, as he darted a quick look to his left, my only escape lies over there.*

A couple of feet away from Red, right in between him and Borus, was a glass basement window belonging to the backside of a building. In size it was large enough to fit Red's slim body, yet sufficiently small to prevent his bulky assailant from following him. His focus of attention had been followed closely by Borus though, and the guard seemed to infer what Red was aiming at. *Too slow, my friend, Red thought, and fast as an arrow he made a run for the window. Within mere seconds he was sliding feet first towards the narrow, glass entrance, bracing himself for impact. Borus had remained where he stood, like a living statue. With the little shrewdness the guard possessed, he admitted to himself his lack of agility and decided on another tactic. As the boy had started sprinting, Borus had reached for a steel dagger on his guard's belt and launched it in the path of the young thief – a throw fueled more by frustration than by a desire for justice. Bastard, Red thought as he was about to collide with the glass and saw the dagger flying his way, as if I am not going to get enough scratches already.*

The window shattered into a thousand little shards, some of which dug their way deep into Red's skin. He felt them sting as he landed on the wooden basement floor. Nonetheless, the hurt they were causing was drowned by a greater sensation of pain; Borus' dagger had not missed its target and had planted itself in Red's left thigh.

The boy bit his teeth and instinctively pulled the cold steel out of his leg. Blood flowed like a flooding river onto the wooden planks and colored the area around the wound bright red. The sight of the wound confronted him with a dark reality: as much as he wanted to believe he had been playing with the Legion guards, – the cat and mouse game that is – they had not been playing with him. *I guess some of them do take their job seriously*, he thought with a grimace, before the pain forced out all thinking and demanded his complete attention. He wanted to scream his lungs out, yet kept his mouth shut as he deemed it foolish to draw more unwanted attention. Not that it mattered much though. Borus would gather a group of guards and storm in through the front door anyway, Red guessed, scrambling to his feet.

He cursed the blood covered dagger, flung it away, grabbed his duffel bag and suppressed the ache in his leg as he tried to limp to the only door in the room. Suddenly, he became aware of the welcome scent of liquor and perfume that had infiltrated his nostrils. *Where am I anyway?* he thought, *I came from the market square, ran into fisherman's alley, and this must have been the back of the second... No, third house on the left... Which means that this must be the basement of... an inn, but which one?* He looked around the room before turning the doorknob and took in his surroundings; a bed with red, flannel sheets, candles burning on the nightstand, some bottles of perfume and Old Jaggert's laying around, and an open closet with a mirror and sensual nightgowns hanging in it... This was clearly not the basement chamber of just any inn, Red thought. With his sixteen summers he would be considered a boy by most, but this boy was old enough to put together the pieces of the puzzle at hand.

"The Rusty Hook! Of course," Red said out loud, to no one but himself and let out a small sigh of relief.

The owner of the Rusty Hook, Gulligan Hook, was notorious for only letting in paying customers. Red had experienced this first hand after being slightly too curious about the proceedings of the brothel. Even the guards would struggle to get in, lest they be willing to provide the obligatory fee for pleasure. This bought him time, yet eventually they would overpower Gulligan and his doormen, Red predicted, so the amount of time he could spare was uncertain. *Unfortunately, not enough time to further "investigate" the establishment*, Red thought with a grin, and then the throbbing pain in his leg pulled his mind away from desire and forced him to think about the reality of his dire situation.

He could not go back through the basement window, even Borus had brains enough to leave a guard there. Furthermore, the brothel was attached to a bar on the left and an inn on the right – so no side windows to escape through. And lastly, the front door would be swarming with guards abusing Gulligan. Red knew, his only option was to reach a window on the highest floor and clamber up to the roof. *Better I get going*, he thought determined.

The door he had opened revealed a corridor with stone walls, carrying torches and paintings of lewd, scarcely dressed women. He counted two additional, similar doors on his side of the wall, and one peculiar metal door across from him. A red and gold carpet lay rolled out like a giant tongue, licking the lowest step of a winding, metal staircase at the other end of the corridor. Spiraling upward, the staircase led to a wooden hatch in the ceiling. Red bolted towards the stairs, adrenaline holding the pain in his thigh at bay for now. Nevertheless, climbing to the top felt as if he had conquered a giant mountain. Slowly, he pushed up the lid of the hatch with his head and peeked around, like a mole cautiously coming out of his hole. At first, the coast seemed clear; he found himself in a large, dimly lit room – a backroom of the brothel, serving as a pathway of discretion for those seeking to indulge in sensuous delights – with no one in it. Yet, as he was about to crawl out, Red heard loud voices and commotion coming from the common room. The clamor of men drinking, gambling and cursing had died down and gave way for quarreling at the front door.

"I will have you know you are housing a criminal, Mister Hook! Further interference with our duty as Legion guard shall be noted and not taken kindly by captain Morris."

The voice, intimidating and loud, belonged to Borus, Red assessed.

Gulligan replied coldly, "I assure you, Borus, there are but whores in my establishment. If you insist on calling their profession a crime, be my guest. I suppose you sleep with criminals as much as you fight them then? Oh, and please, go and tell Morris, I am sure he will appreciate any excuse to pay me and my ladies a visit, as always."

Red had hoped that the headstrong Gulligan would relent old Borus. Yet to no avail; when Borus understood that Gulligan could not be trumped with authority nor threats, he shoved him aside. Gulligan's fall was broken by one of his alert doormen, while Borus entered the brothel. Red, though he could not see them from where he was hiding, heard about half a dozen other guards barge into the common room like a flock of bulls and receive orders from the bellowing head bull.

"Linez and you two, you search the rooms on the ground floor and basement, if there is one. Ferrin, take the others, cover the first and second floor. Have someone guard the stairs. He can not have gotten far! If he has not yet left this place, we shall find him and I will have a prison cell ready."

Red ducked his head back under the hatch and feared he was cornered. *Trying to run would be senseless at this point*, Red thought, wiping some trickling beads of sweat off his forehead. *Hiding seems the wiser option, and more importantly the only one. Besides, I reckon they are not keen on searching for me all night. If only I could find a good –*

"Who are you? And what is all that noise upstairs? I need to rest." a soft and sleepy voice asked, coming from underneath the stairs Red was crouching on.

He jumped up from surprise, nearly hit his head on the ceiling and lost his balance, causing him to fall backwards. In a desperate attempt to grab the iron railing

of the staircase, Red flailed his arms around. Without any luck, as he tumbled down gracelessly, all the way to the bottom. The throbbing pain in his leg had increased on every impact with the stairs. The blood that had leaked from his wound gave the metallic structure a rusty appearance. His face was pressed against the fabric of the gold and red carpet, when he heard the sleepy voice again – this time coming from above him.

"You are one clumsy young man."

Slowly, and dazed from his involuntary descent, he started lifting his head up. First he saw white, gentle feet in sandals; next came a pair of elegant legs, uncovered except for the upper thighs; a graceful, slender figure followed, wrapped in a velvet, dark green nightgown; and lastly, when his head was tilted all the way up, he looked into two big, green blue eyes belonging to a fair face, easy on the eyes, with soft features and a light complexion. Her straight, gleaming hair hung loose over one shoulder, brown like chestnuts. As she bent over to get a closer look at him, Red caught a hint of her sweet, peachy perfume, and felt seduced by its scent. He estimated her to have four, at most five summers on him. *Must be one of the pleasure girls*, he thought. *She must have been sleeping in one of the other rooms before her night shift started. At least I made a good impression.*

When the clumsy boy sprang to his feet, she noticed the dried-up blood stains on his leather breeches, and the reason for them.

"Oh dear," she muttered. "Who did that to you?"

Red decided to answer her initial two questions first. Meanwhile, he was striding towards the metal door at the other end of the corridor. Perhaps it concealed a storage room of some sort – lots of hiding opportunities there, especially in the dark.

"They call me Red," he said fleetingly. "I am playing hide and seek with the guards – hence the noise upstairs."

Immediately after uttering the words, he wished he had swallowed them. *Fool! Why tell her? What stops her from screaming to attract the guards?* To his relief, no screaming ensued. Instead, the pretty pleasure girl posed another question. Red was tugging with full force at the metal door, which refused to budge. He dreaded the footsteps above him, growing louder and coming nearer by the second. Soon they would find the basement hatch, he predicted.

"You mean Legion guards?" she asked, and added: "The ones that might pay me handsomely if I help them find you, are those the guards you are talking about?"

Red stopped straining himself on the stubborn door at once. He turned to her and provided her with an imploring look. She answered his gaze with a blank stare, her blue green eyes giving away nothing about her reservations. A few moments passed, which Red perceived as ages. And then, to his surprise and confusion, she ended their eye contact by smiling and giggling.

"Do not fear, young Red. I was merely playing with you. For no coin in the world would I lend a hand to those Legion scoundrels. Besides, I do not care what

petty mischief you have committed, you seem no criminal to me." she said. "My name is Desoriah, but call me Sori."

Red felt glad to have found an ally, though also worried about the footsteps and voices that could now be heard right above them.

"Sori, I –" he started.

"Yes, I can help you," she said. "Come, follow me to my room, there is not much time."

She threw him a piece of cloth.

"Use this to bandage your leg for now, so that they cannot trace your trail of blood."

Red nodded and did as she told him. *No lack of wits in this one*, he thought. Sori's room resembled the room through which he had entered the building, not counting the broken window and bloody floor. Red shut the door and a few seconds later he heard the hatch in the corridor slam open. When Red turned around, he saw Sori laying under the sheets of her bed. For a moment, he was confused. *She knows I am not a customer, right?* And then he realized what her plan was.

"Roll under the bed!" she whispered adamantly.

He did, just in time to avoid being seen by the two guards who forced their way into the room. As soon as they witnessed Sori, she started yelling at them.

"What are you doing here? I am working and require privacy! Remove yourself from my chamber at once!"

She had made a bulge with pillows under the sheets, so that it appeared someone was laying next to her. One of the two guards urged the other to leave, yet the persistent one tested his luck.

"Our apologies ma'am, but we are looking for a young thief, wearing beggars' clothes and a bag full of –"

Sori interrupted him.

"Do you think I would still be here, doing what I am doing, if a criminal had just showed up? What do you take me for? You are wasting your time here, get on with your damned search! Or would you like to enjoy the show, eh? Is that why you are here? I should have thought so, you Legion pigs are all –"

She stopped shouting when the guards had closed the door behind them, convinced by her performance and fed up with her tirade. Sori fell back in bed with a pleased smile on her face.

Red finally blew out the breath he had been holding in during the guards' visit. Although relieved, he remained under the bed silently until the footsteps in the corridor had finished their investigation and were heading back upstairs. And then he waited some more. He could imagine Borus' fury upon realizing Red had slipped through his fingers. This was not the first time he had evaded the old bull; on several occasions Red had left Borus empty-handed, oftentimes escaping through the eye of the needle. But the eye had never been as small as tonight. More so, he had always gotten away fairly unscathed. Not this time; now that the threat of rotting away in a jail cell

was fading, the affliction in his thigh took center stage. The cloth Sori had given him had turned red as a butcher's knife. On the bright side, the bleeding had come to a halt. It appeared the wound was less deep than he had feared. If pain had a voice however, it would be screeching into his ears. So Red decided to hush the screeching with one of today's stolen items. He reached for his duffel bag, took out a glass bottle and let rum flow into his throat. The burn took him by surprise – it had been a while since alcohol had entered his system. Nevertheless, it would work in the way Red wanted it to work. After a few considerable gulps, he rolled from under the bed and got to his feet, with his back to the bed.

"I owe you my freedom, Sori." Red said, staring through the basement window at the full moon. "I do not know who you are and why you chose to help me, you could have been a rich woman after selling me out. Yet you did not, you selflessly came to my aid, and for this, I owe you my gratitude..."

Red took another sip of the bottle whilst awaiting a response. None came, and so he went on, "At the moment, I have not much to offer you in return. However, if there is an item you so desire, there is little I cannot get my hands on. I would gladly offer you the service of my shadow..."

Still, no answer came. The room was eerily quiet. Red felt as though he had been talking to the moon.

"Sori...?"

He swallowed some more liquid pain relief and turned around to confirm she had not been but a figment of his imagination. *Perhaps the blood loss is beginning to affect me*, Red thought. But then he saw her. Only, the grace that Sori possessed when he had first laid eyes on her, she now lacked. Her limbs were spread out in all directions, covering the whole bed. The sheets were a chaotic mess. Her brown hair lay tangled across her white face. She had her eyes shut and her mouth was wide open and drooling. Red smiled. *She fell asleep? After all that? A girl of many talents to be sure*. He tucked her in – the least he could do – and fumbled around in his bag looking for an appropriate token of his gratitude. *Meat? No. Fish? No. Ah, perhaps these can now serve a purpose*, he thought, and put two of them on the bedside table. After some hesitation, he took out his purse as well and looked at the copious stolen coin inside, contemplating. *I need all the coin I can get for my journey east, one day... But if not for her I would have lost all my day's winnings, and more importantly, my freedom*. And with that in mind and the rum in his blood – fueling his generosity – he slipped five gold coins in her nightgown, enough to feed her for many moons to come. She stirred in her sleep gently, almost as if to say thank you.

Red sighed and seated himself on a chair near the window. The candle on the bedside table had died, appointing the light of the moon as its sole successor. For some reason Red was reluctant to leave, even though he knew he should. Some moments ago, the bell in the tower had rung ten times. Gulligan or one of his doormen might come to check the room. Mister Hook would not be pleased if the

guards he so despised had been right and an intruder turned up after all. Aside from that, Red needed to figure out how to deal with this inconvenient leg injury. Although the perceived severity of that issue decreased – both in mind and body – with each sip of rum, he still acknowledged that it required his attention.

Yet Red stayed. He was toying with a copper coin in his right hand and clasped the half empty bottle with the other. His eyes, lost in thought, rested on Sori. Something about the girl on the bed touched him. He could not say exactly why, but he felt unwilling to forsake her. It was not pity, but rather... some sort of solidarity. No matter how many visitors came to see her each night, Red could tell that she knew loneliness very well. He had sensed it in those big, green blue eyes. *Perhaps the same kind of loneliness I have known since I 'woke up'...* Red pondered. *Though I have Arrow. Does she have anyone? How did she end up here? Who is she...? Why do you care so much, Red? Maybe ease up on the rum...* As his thoughts trailed off, his eyelids grew weary and his mind turned hazy. Sleep snuck up on him. For a while, Sori's chamber was bustling with nothing but dreams.

Not long after Red had dozed off, an abrupt noise pulled him from his slumber. It was the hatch in the corridor. Someone was making their way down the stairs. Red got up from the chair and slapped his cheeks to regain his senses. A nasally voice came from the corridor.

"Sori... Sori! Willard is here to see you. Are you awake? You were supposed to be ready half an hour ago!"

Business in the brothel seemed to go on as usual. Red swung his bag over his shoulder and opened the window. A fist knocked on the door, and the voice continued:

"Sori? Are you ready? Must I remind you how Lord Willard hates waiting..."

As Red crawled through the window, he heard a soft voice reply.

"Yes, Markell, I am awake... good job. Though not ready, can you request him to wait five more minutes, please?" Sori said, yawning.

Markell grumbled, but seemed pleased for now, and went back upstairs. Then Sori turned to Red, who was already outside. Getting his body through the opening had caused him great pain in his leg. He was now awkwardly waiting for some sort of goodbye, he guessed. Sori went to lock the door of her chamber.

"So, you must be leaving, eh? I must have fallen asleep." she said with a smile. "A short visit to be sure, young Red. Will you be okay? How is your leg?"

She walked towards the open window and looked up at Red. The moonlit sky was sparkling with stars.

Red shrugged. "...I will be fine. Time heals all wounds," he said with a foolish grin and the wisdom of a drunken boy.

She smelled rum on his breath and noticed the bottle in his hand. "I can see why you would *think* yourself fine." Sori said, shaking her head. "Anyhow, how long was I asleep for? ... And what were you doing here when I was sleeping?"

"...I was... – “

Whatever he was about to say next, was cut off by a roaring voice coming from the corridor. Footsteps were slowly descending the staircase. Red guessed it was Lord Willard.

"Sori! You better be ready and looking pretty! You have kept me waiting long enough, woman."

Sori's gentle smile faded. Red crouched down and looked her in the eyes, her big, beautiful eyes.

"Listen, Sori, I do not want to cause you anymore trouble." he said, and took her hand. "I can not thank you enough for saving me, I do not know why you did it... but I should go now."

"I sensed something kind and good in you, Red. Something I do not sense in most of the men I see here." she said, and a loud knock on the door followed. "...And since I have saved you and all... will you come and pay me a visit every now and then?"

Red struggled to gather his words.

"I... guess... visit... Yes...I will."

An impatient Willard was pounding on the door vigorously. "Sori, you wench! Open up! How much longer do you plan on keeping me waiting?"

"Promise...?" Sori asked.

Red saw that her eyes had become filled with tears, like lakes about to overflow. In them, he felt the same kind of loneliness he had felt before, only now more profound.

Sadness and sorrow washed over him, yet he kept his answer resolute.

"I promise."

"Good..." And then she pulled him closer by his shirt and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "One real kiss... before my night of pretending begins." she said, as she wiped away her tears. Her smile somewhat returned. "Goodnight, Red."

She closed the window and its curtains, and turned around. "Apologies, Lord Willard, I am almost ready." she yelled at the door. "Trying to be as pretty as possible for my favorite customer."

The flattering seemed to calm him down. *Good thing Willard is like a barking dog with no teeth.* Sori thought, as she got dressed, ignoring his complaints. Hanging up her nightgown, she reckoned it heavier than usual. In the pockets were five gold coins.

"Oh my!" she gasped.

*It must have been... What sort of a thief is this boy?* Then she noticed something on the bedside table. *A charming one.* she thought and smiled. Before unlocking the door, she sniffed the two roses deeply – one white, and one red. For the rest of her life, she would remember him by the smell of rum and roses.